JOHN McAULEY PALMER AND THE RESERVE COMPONENTS

by

JONATHAN M. HOUSE

mericans have long believed that the part-time citizen-soldier is the best defender of a free society. They have traditionally seen a standing army as expensive, undemocratic, poorly motivated, and potentially dangerous to the nation that pays it. Only a minority have argued that the training and command of citizen-soldiers should be entrusted to professional officers as the people best equipped to conduct our defense.

The controversy over the merits of a citizen soldiery as opposed to a professional one was particularly strong at the beginning of this century, when the United States began to develop the institutions of a great power. One of the most influential participants in this debate was John McAuley Palmer (1870-1955). In sharp contrast to many other professional soldiers, Palmer believed strongly in the value of reserve component forces organized, trained, and led by reserve component officers. This unusual belief enabled Palmer to strongly influence the evolution of a compromise force structure that would include the Regular Army, National Guard, and Army Reserve. Whether by conscious design or not, our current force structure is in large measure a reflection of Palmer's ideas.

Any assessment of Palmer's role must begin by reviewing the debate in which he participated. This debate arose from the increased colonial and military responsibilities that the United States acquired as a result of the Spanish-American War. To meet those responsibilities, many professional soldiers favored a large standing army and national reserve force on the model of the system used by the European powers. One version of the European model was a skeleton regular army that was expansible by the mobilization of federal reservists or volunteers. Such reservists or volunteers would be placed completely under the control of the regular army, filling gaps in the regular ranks rather than forming their own units. This expansion concept had existed for centuries and had been pursued in America by as early an advocate as Alexander Hamilton. The bible of the expansible army in this century, however, is The Military Policy of the United States, written in 1878 by Major General Emory Upton and belatedly published in 1903 by Secretary of War Elihu Root.1

This concept of a professional army was bitterly opposed by advocates of America's citizen-soldier tradition. After the Spanish-American War, the Organized Militia units of the states, unofficially called the National Guard, rightly feared the expansible army as a threat to their continued existence. As a result of his experiences in the Civil War. Emory Upton had seen little or no use for the militia, and in particular had distrusted citizen-soldier units commanded by "amateur" officers. Long after Upton's death in 1881, his disciples criticized the wide differences in organization, equipment, and training of the Guard units from one state to another. More important, most of the War Department General Staff believed that the militia was unsuitable for federal purposes

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because of the extreme constitutional limitations on that force. In 1912 the Attorney General, George Wickersham, would issue a formal opinion that fully confirmed these limitations. Wickersham would conclude that the power of Congress to use the militia was separate from the power to raise and support armies, and that under the Constitution the militia could only be employed for three purposes: to suppress insurrection, to repel invasion, and to execute the laws of the Union. Under these restrictions, Congress could not deploy the militia beyond the borders of the nation except, perhaps, in hot pursuit of an invasion that had been repelled.² This strict interpretation of the Constitution would be consistent with a militia refusal to invade Canada during the War of 1812. Against this background, Secretaries of War such as Elihu Root and Henry Stimson sought a deployable, federal army reserve to replace the militia.

The National Guard Association attempted to counter these criticisms of the militia. Immediately after the Spanish-American War, the Chairman of the Senate Committee on Military Affairs, Senator Charles Dick of Ohio, was also president of the National Guard Association. In a compromise with Secretary Root, Dick sponsored the 1903 Militia Act to provide federal equipment and tables of organization, as well as minimum training standards, for all Organized Militia units. The Dick Amendment of 1908 and the Volunteer Act of 1914 tried to circumvent the constitutional question by enabling the Organized Militia to volunteer and serve as deployable federal units in wartime, and by requiring the federal government to accept all such militia volunteers before opening enlistments to the general public.3 But the War Department General Staff contended that mobilization plans could not be based on uncertain estimates of how many militiamen would volunteer-the country needed a reliable reserve structure. In 1912, Chief of Staff Leonard Wood tried to implement the expansible army concept by adding four years of unpaid "furlough" reserve service to the

obligation of Regular Army enlistees. Since most Regulars reenlisted at the end of their active-duty tours, however, Wood's efforts failed to produce a substantial reserve.⁴

The education of John McAuley Palmer suggests that he should have been a typical advocate of the expansible army concept. An 1892 graduate of the US Military Academy, he was one of the first products of Root's training system for General Staff officers at Fort Leavenworth and the Army War College. In all his military schooling, Palmer had been taught Emory Upton's beliefs about the expansible army and the constitutional limitations of the militia. But Palmer had a respect for citizen soldiers and a sense of political realities that were rare in the Army of his day. The reason for this was simple: Palmer was the grandson of a successful citizen-soldier and politician of the same name. The elder John McAuley Palmer had been a major general and corps commander of volunteers during the Civil War, and he later was elected Governor of Illinois and then a US Senator. Soon after graduating from West Point, the Regular Army grandson expounded the Uptonian gospel to the Senator. The response was characteristic:

Well, my boy, I am not an educated military expert as you are, but my worst enemies will admit that I am something of a political expert. And I can assure you, positively, that the American people will never accept that expansible standing army scheme of yours. If that is your best solution, you had better forget it and work up a second best that will have some chance of getting through Congress.⁵

Under his grandfather's influence, Palmer began to think about ways to develop citizensoldiers in peacetime, in order to avoid the chaos of mobilization and training in wartime.

It took years for Palmer to work out his final position on the citizen-soldier. Yet by the time he joined the War Department General Staff in 1911 as a captain, Palmer believed strongly in the desirability of some type of reserve component army, although he felt stymied by the militia provision of the Constitution. A willingness to take on such obstacles was nevertheless evident in his first major venture into the reserve component question, the Report on the Organization of the Land Forces of the United States of 1912. Palmer wrote this staff study as a member of a committee to review the American defense structure. Secretary of War Stimson was so impressed with it that he had an edited version published as an annex to the Secretary's annual report for 1912.

In the study, Palmer reviewed all the usual objections to the use of militia but, then, instead of dismissing militia forces from further consideration in the study, he suggested various means, including federal pay and a federal oath, for incorporating parts of the organized state militia into the national forces. In fact, pending a solution to the constitutional issue, the 1912 *Report* proceeded to plan for a full integration of a "National Guard," whether state or federal, in the mobilization of Army forces. Palmer wrote:

It is the traditional policy of the United States that the military establishment in time of peace is to be a small Regular Army and that the ultimate war force of the Nation is to be a great army of citizen soldiers. This fundamental theory of military organization is sound economically and politically.⁷

The force structure would therefore consist of three elements: the Regular Army for minor contingencies and to act if necessary before the reserve components could mobilize; an "army of national citizen-soldiers" organized into their own peacetime units instead of filling out the skeleton Regular Army; and an "army of volunteers" to be organized and trained under prearranged plans once war began.

In time of war, Palmer insisted, the Regular Army would supplement the Guard, rather than vice versa. He was quick to point out, however, that "reliance upon citizensoldiers is subject to the limitation that they

cannot meet a trained enemy until they, too, have been trained." To assist the two non-Regular components, Palmer therefore proposed the creation of 16 geographic districts, each built around sufficient militia units to make up a division, and each staffed with Regular Army "instructor inspectors."

Although not all of these ideas originated with Palmer, his report would later provide ammunition to help enact such measures as the National Defense Act of 1916. Additionally, in his first published effort, Palmer had outlined the concept that he, himself, would even later write into law, a concept in which the Regular Army would cooperate with Organized Militia units while developing a third line of skeleton, federal reserve units. This construct differed greatly from that of individual reservists sought by Emory Upton.

Having published this heretical theory, Captain Palmer was unseated by the provisions of the "Manchu Act" of 1912. This law prohibited General Staff service by any officer who had not spent two of the previous six years on troop duty, and thereby terminated the tours of many staff officers in the nation's capital just as the Manchu Dynasty had recently been terminated in China. In Palmer's case, there was an added irony in that he was ordered to rejoin the 15th US Infantry Regiment in northern China!

While Palmer earned his major's leaves in China and the Philippines, his former comrades on the General Staff renewed their efforts to create an expansible army. In 1915, under the impetus of the Great War in Europe, Secretary of War Lindley Garrison

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directed the General Staff to produce a concise proposal for national defense on the general lines of Palmer's 1912 Report. The result was neither concise nor in accordance with the views expressed by Palmer. After repeating verbatim the 1912 study on defense requirements and the Regular Army's missions, the new Statement of a Proper Military Policy for the United States (1915) returned to the old arguments on what it baldly described as the "Worthlessness of the Militia." This new study advocated instead a 379,000-man reservist force, the "Continental Army," to be organized, trained, and commanded by Regular officers. The militia was relegated to guarding coastlines, canal locks, and arsenals at home. 10

The Statement of A Proper Military Policy caused such controversy that Secretary Garrison ultimately resigned. Despite public interest in "preparedness," a stalemate ensued in Congress, broken only when the US Mexican expedition of 1916 forced the hasty passage of a new law to strengthen both Regulars and National Guardsmen. Among other provisions, the National Defense Act of 1916 provided federal drill pay for Guardsmen in specified units, while requiring such personnel to take a dual oath to the state and federal governments.11 Yet, despite the excellent performance of the Guard on the Mexican border and during World War I, the basic argument between Uptonians and citizen-soldiers was unresolved.

In the interim, Palmer apparently decided that Congress could not or would not solve the problem of constitutionally imposed limitations on the state-operated National Guard. He therefore produced his first piece of writing designed to popularize his ideas. An Army of the People, published in early 1916, offered fictional examples of how a federal force of reservists could ensure the national defense in a nonmilitaristic, inexpensive manner. Even though he temporarily turned his attention away from the stateoperated National Guard, Major Palmer was still advocating an army of volunteer reservists, not an expansible Regular Army. Entire units were to be trained and commanded by citizen-soldiers. with

minimum technical advice from Regular instructor-inspectors. ¹² Upon his return to the General Staff in 1916, Palmer became an enthusiastic supporter of the Military Training Camps Association. Although the "Plattsburgh" camps, founded in 1915, eventually developed into officer candidate schools, in their origin they appeared similar in concept to Palmer's own beliefs.

orld War I required mobilization on a scale beyond the numbers of the Regular Army, the National Guard, and the infant Organized Reserve Corps. Sixteen of the 18 National Guard divisions and an equal number of conscripted or volunteer National Army divisions were formed along the geographic lines advocated in Palmer's 1912 Report. The actual mobilization plan was produced in late 1916 by a staff committee that included Palmer. Many professional soldiers were again impressed with the need for a larger pool of trained reserve component units to meet the demands of any future war.

Palmer himself went overseas as one of the first staff officers to accompany General Pershing. Palmer worked so hard, first as an assistant chief of staff and then as an instructor in the officer schools established in that his health broke down France. repeatedly. Finally, Pershing (in his own words) "was unwilling that he [Palmer] should return to the grind of staff work and assigned him to duty with troops."13 It is a strange commentary that Pershing would consider service as an instructor more strenuous than command of a brigade in combat! In any event, Palmer ended the war as a temporary colonel commanding the 58th Infantry Brigade in the 29th ("Blue and Grey") Infantry Division. This group of National Guardsmen only reinforced Palmer's belief in the value of citizen-Indeed, the outstanding soldiers. formance of the National Guard and Organized Reserve in World War I provided powerful proof that an expansible army under Regular guidance was unnecessary.

Soon after the armistice, Pershing sent Palmer home to the War Department to assist

in planning a postwar military structure. According to Palmer, however, Pershing did not give any specific guidance about this structure, and Palmer never claimed to represent his former commander.¹⁴

Colonel Palmer arrived home to find that the War Department had already submitted its postwar plans to Congress. Not surprisingly, these plans called once again for an expansible army. General Peyton March, the wartime Chief of Staff, had sold this idea to Secretary of War Newton Baker and President Woodrow Wilson. The March plan advocated a 509,000-man standing army that would expand in wartime to more than 1 million troops by the recall of federal reservists who had received compulsory military training. The National Guard was not even mentioned in March's proposal.¹⁵

If General March hoped to gain approval before the lessons of the war were forgotten, he was disappointed. To the usual complaints about the militarism and expense of a standing army was added all the pent-up wartime dislike of Regular officers in general and Peyton March in particular. Both houses of Congress delayed consideration of a permanent defense structure until August 1919. By October of that year, the Senate Committee on Military Affairs had decided to reject the March plan and was casting about for an alternative. The committee's chairman, Senator James W. Wadsworth, Jr., called upon Palmer to testify. Wadsworth later said that Palmer had been suggested as a witness by unidentified junior officers, but he may have been called simply as Chief of the War Plans Branch of the General Staff. In either case, Colonel Palmer had previously heard Senator Wadsworth ask the members of the Military Training Camps Association to give their honest opinions if called to testify. Palmer was more than willing to do the same.16

On 9 October 1919, Palmer appeared before a subcommittee chaired by Wadsworth. After expounding on the differences between the "militarism" of a standing army and the democracy of an army of citizen reservists, Palmer roundly denounced the March plan:

[The] proposal for an organized citizen army in time of peace is merely a proposal for perfecting a traditional national institution to meet modern requirements which no longer permit extemporization after the outbreak of war. . . .

In my opinion, the War Department bill proposes incomplete preparedness at excessive cost and under forms that are not in harmony with the genius of American institutions.¹⁷

After two days of such testimony on everything from universal military training to the powers of the Chief of Staff, Palmer seemed to be the indispensable expert that the subcommittee needed. Senator Wadsworth asked for and received Palmer's assignment to assist in preparing new legislation. In the process, Secretary of War Baker carefully specified that Palmer did not represent the views of the War Department. Colonel Palmer had clearly jeopardized his military career by his outspoken testimony. By the same token, however, he was now completely free to put his own ideas into the law.

During the next eight months, Palmer and a friend, Colonel John W. Gulick, labored to produce an integrated defense force comprised of the reserve components and the smallest possible Regular Army. At the same time, two other officers who represented the official War Department position advised the House of Representatives Committee on Military Affairs. This difference in advisors only exacerbated the differences between the various bills prepared by March, Wadsworth-Palmer, and the National Guard Association.

Palmer began his work with the opinion, stemming from his service with the 29th Division, that the National Guard should be reorganized as a federal force to end the duality of state and federal requirements.¹⁹ In the course of drafting the new bill, however, he apparently became convinced that the National Guard could function in a dual role. On the other hand, Palmer was much less willing to change his mind on the question of universal military training. Together with

March and many other soldiers, he considered some form of mandatory training essential to provide the trained manpower for whatever types of reserves were finally chosen. Peacetime conscription was so unpopular, however, that the issue threatened to block any changes in defense organization. For that reason, Palmer agreed to sacrifice universal military training to get the Wadsworth bill past the full Senate.

Finally, his plans were again modified in a conference committee of both houses. The House members did not object to Palmer's plans, but they had been empowered to negotiate only an amendment to the 1916 National Defense Act, rather than a completely new law. The resulting act of 4 June 1920 was a truncated version of Palmer's plan, but it included the essential provisions of that plan. The military establishment was defined as including the Regular Army, National Guard, and Organized Reserve. The two reserve components were to be formed in complete brigades and divisions within nine geographic corps areas. Most important, the detailed force structure was to be determined by a committee composed of equal numbers of Regular and reserve component officers. This provision alone ensured some measure of War Department cooperation in reorganizing the reserve components demobilization. Moreover, the Civilian Military Training Camps were "regularized" and included in the law, and multiple provisions were introduced to provide Regular Army support but not command of Guard units.20

Colonel Palmer was able to implement many of his other ideas as a member of the Regular/reserve-component officer board authorized by the 1920 act. Essentially, this board planned to distribute the Regular, Guard, and Reserve forces into the nine corps areas. Each corps was to have a combination of divisions from all three components. A Regular Army corps commander, staff, and trainers, or inspectors, were responsible for training these divisions. Although the National Guard belonged to the states in peacetime, this system was intended to

provide an even closer integration of the "total force" than that provided by the modern Army Readiness and Mobilization Regions.²¹

Two weaknesses limited the practical effectiveness of these plans. First, as already noted, the entire system depended on voluntary manpower, so that all three components had recruiting difficulties. These difficulties were compounded by a shortage of funds in the budget- and isolation-minded United States between the World Wars. The 1920 act had authorized approximately 280,000 Regular troops, the figure voiced by Palmer in his first day of testimony.²² Army appropriations, however, never even approached the funding required to support this strength. As a result, the War Department shortchanged reserve component support and skeletonized the Regular divisions in a thoroughly Uptonian manner. Many Regular soldiers, notably Major General Douglas MacArthur, gave citizen military training and the reserve components their full support, but the results were uneven at best. Despite these difficulties, however, the mobilization structure of the World War I Army was preserved for its revival in 1940.

The combination of peacetime economies and his own notoriety stunted John McAuley Palmer's career, although he did retire as a brigadier general in 1926. When Pershing became Chief of Staff in 1921, Palmer requested and received a staff position that would allow him to write articles on national military policy. While working for Pershing, Colonel Palmer served on many advisory boards. In particular, he participated in the deliberations of the Harbord Board of 1921, which reorganized the General Staff to incorporate the lessons learned in France.²³

After he retired, General Palmer continued his effort to influence public opinion by writing a series of books and articles about the use of the reserve components. Like all good publicists, he repeated the same line of argument over and over. The only discernible change in his position was that once World

War II loomed, he stopped trying to point out the wisdom of maintaining strong volunteermanned reserve components and began to reiterate his basic belief in universal military training.

Two of his works bear serious consideration because they illustrate his thought and long-term influence. The first of these. Statesmanship or War (1927) is a study of the Swiss militia system and its application to American defense. Here Palmer described three functions for which the Regular Army had to be retained. First, the Regulars had to garrison strategic positions, such as Hawaii and the Panama Canal, where no reservists were available. Second, within the United States a limited number of active-duty divisions had to be maintained at full rather than skeleton strength to handle minor emergencies and sudden deployments. Third, a minimum number of Regular soldiers were required to provide administration and assistance for the reserve components.24 In the 1980s, Palmer's first function might be redefined to include divisions deployed in Korea and Europe, and his second function might be relabelled as the Army's contingency force within the United States. With these modifications, the clarity of Palmer's foresight is evident.

In the same book, Palmer distinguished between the three components of the Army. As already indicated, the Regular Army would be a limited force, with the National Guard providing most of America's defense. In Palmer's view, Army Reserve units would be maintained only as cadres of commissioned and noncommissioned officers. In the event of war, these cadres would then train the volunteers or conscripts who had not entered the reserve components in peacetime. This idea of a reserve training cadre, when taken in conjunction with Palmer's belief that the reserve components should run their own basic training on the Swiss model, is a clear forerunner of the Army Reserve training divisions formed 30 years later.

In 1930, General Palmer published his most serious work, Washington, Lincoln, Wilson: Three War Statesmen. While conducting research on the history of the

citizen-soldier, Palmer had American On a Peace "Sentiments discovered Establishment," written by George Washington at the end of the Revolutionary War. In that essay, Washington had advocated both a small regular army on the frontier and a well-trained reserve divided into a general militia of all citizens and a select, highly organized force of the youngest adult men. Later historians, notably Richard Kohn, have argued that Washington's militia proposal was only a concession to the popular belief in citizen-soldiers. When Palmer first "Sentiments On a Peace discovered Establishment," however, he took it at its value. Palmer concluded that Washington, Baron von Steuben, and Henry Knox had tried in vain to establish an organized militia similar to the modern National Guard. In Washington, Lincoln, Wilson, Palmer traced this militia concept from Washington forward. If nothing else, his study succeeded in damaging Emory Upton's historical case against the militia.25

During World War II, the ideas of John McAuley Palmer received an unexpected new lease on life because of Palmer's longtime friendship with the Chief of Staff, General George C. Marshall. The two men had known and corresponded with each other since 1910, when Marshall had taught engineering while Palmer was a student at the General Staff College. Marshall later read and critiqued manuscript chapters from Washington, Lincoln, Wilson, and on several occasions tried to promote his friend's books and ideas. ²⁶ Of Statesmanship or War, Marshall wrote:

[The] ablest presentation ever put forth by an American Army or naval officer, in form, English, analysis and conclusions I am strong for your views of the Regular Army and the Citizen Army 27

When the United States entered World War II, General Marshall recalled Palmer to active duty to advise on manpower and on postwar defense structure. Palmer used all his well-polished arguments to further the argument for citizen-soldiers and universal

military training in War Department Circular No. 347, which Marshall issued on 25 August 1944. The same case was made in a Saturday Evening Post article that Palmer wrote to publicize the circular. The November 1945 War Department Basic Plan for the Post-War Military Establishment elaborated the circular's concepts into a complete scheme for use of the reserve components. Americans in 1945 were as tired of conscription as they had been in 1918, however, and universal military training was never really tested.

One can trace a significant continuity of thought from Palmer's 1912 Report on the Organization of the Land Forces of the United States through the National Defense Act of 1920 to our planning in World War II. Certainly it should be noted that George C. Marshall had much greater personal experience with the reserve components than did Palmer, but Palmer's influence, whether through Marshall or by other means, was undeniably seminal.

It is always difficult to assess the effect of ideas, especially if, as in the case of John McAuley Palmer, those ideas were only partially implemented. Still, the fact that Palmer saw even some of his views incorporated into law while his Uptonian peers were thwarted should stand as a commentary on his success and his sense of political realities. Certainly the current total force structure, with its National Guard and Army Reserve units run by citizen-soldiers and advised by the Active Army's Readiness and Mobilization Regions, is too close an approximation of Palmer's ideas to be sheer coincidence.

NOTES

The author wishes to thank Professor I. B. Holley, Jr., for his assistance on several points in this article.

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 - 18. Palmer, America in Arms, p. 169.
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- 21. Weigley, pp. 397-400. Palmer, America in Arms, p. 185.
- 22. The National Defense Act Approved June 3, 1916, As Amended, Section 2, p. 9.
- 23. Larry L. Bland and Sharon R. Ritenour, ed., The Papers of George Catlett Marshall, Volume I: The Soldierly Spirit, December 1880 June 1939 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1981), pp. 208-10. On Palmer and the Harbord Board, see The National Defense: Hearings, pp. 568-83.
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- 26. Bland and Ritenour, Vol. I, pp. 46-47, 338-39, and 346.
 - 27. Ibid., p. 313.
- 28. US War Department Circular No. 347, 25 August 1944, Section III; John M. Palmer, "General Marshall Wants A Citizen Army," Saturday Evening Post, 18 December 1944, pp. 9-10, 56-57. This article is perhaps the briefest expression of Palmer's historical arguments for the citizen-soldier.
- 29. US War Department, Office of the Chief of Staff, War Department Basic Plan for the Post-War Military Establishment, mimeographed, November 1945.

